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**COMMUNICATION, ORGANIZING AND ORGANIZATION: AN OVERVIEW AND  
INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE**

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### Abstract

This paper provides an overview of previous work that has explored the processes and mechanisms by which communication constitutes organizing (as ongoing efforts at coordination and control of activity and knowledge) and organizations (as collective actors that are ‘talked’ into existence). We highlight differences between existing theories and analyses grounded in communication-as-constitutive (CCO) perspectives, and describe six overarching premises for such perspectives; in so doing, we sharpen and bound the explanatory power of CCO perspectives for organization studies more generally. Building on these premises, we develop an agenda for further research, call for greater cross-fertilization between the communication and organization literatures, and illustrate ways in which communication informed analyses have complemented and strengthened theories of the firm, organizational identity, sensemaking and strategy as practice.

Across disciplines, scholars of organizations increasingly assert that organizations are constituted in and through human communication, a perspective that has recently been coined the CCO approach (for Communicative Constitution of Organization, see Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Although several versions of this view can be identified (see Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Boden, 1994; Kuhn, 2008; Manning, 1982; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Taylor & Van Every, 2000), the general claim is that if communication is indeed constitutive of organization, it cannot be considered to be simply one of the many factors involved in organizing, and cannot be merely the vehicle for the expression of pre-existing ‘realities’; rather, it is the means by which organizations are established, composed, designed, and sustained. Consequently, organizations can no longer be seen as objects, entities, or ‘social facts’ inside of which communication occurs. Organizations are portrayed, instead, as ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily—if not exclusively—*in* communication processes.

Although the forms assumed by ‘communication’ in this literature are varied (e.g., speech acts, turns of talk, discourse, rhetorical tropes, texts, narratives), the central contribution of a

CCO perspective is that it enables a rethinking of ontological and epistemological positions on organization that can open up avenues for novel theoretical and empirical research. Yet the proliferation of communication-based accounts has coincided with conceptual and methodological debates regarding the ‘proper’ way of doing organizational communication research, both within and across scholarly communities. The wide array of approaches to understanding the communicative constitution of organization has led to conceptual confusion, challenges in traversing disciplinary boundaries, and to difficulties in using communication-based resources in ways that advance organization theory (Ashcraft et al., 2009).

We believe that much is to be gained by a serious reflection on what scholars mean when they argue that communication constitutes organizations. A detailed interrogation of communication-based visions of organizing—in terms of assessing the current state of theorizing, methodology and empirical research—is essential if we are to identify novel, imaginative and methodologically well-founded contributions to organization theory. Therefore, the goals of this issue are to (a) build conceptual foundations, frameworks and methods that will facilitate empirical inquiry from diverse perspectives, (b) encourage scholars to examine organizational communication through novel theoretical lenses, including approaches critical of conventional thinking, (c) demonstrate the value of a communicative approach to studying organization and (d) articulate the implications of distinctly communicative explanations of organizations and organizing with respect to issues that interest scholars of organization generally.

The four articles selected for this special issue, as well as the afterword authored by James R. Taylor, all contribute, in their own respective ways, to these four endeavors by showing how productive the CCO perspective can be, both theoretically and empirically, when it comes to better understanding how organizations concretely work and function. As long as

communicational events were reduced to an afterthought in our research agendas, as simply something that happens *in* organizations, one could easily disconnect what happens on the *terra firma* of interaction from the very constitution of collective forms. However, thinking in terms of communicative constitution forces us not only to take language, discourse and communication seriously, but also to reconsider the very way we conceive of the being and acting of organizations (not to mention collective forms, in general). Echoing Dewey's (1916/1944) famous statement while applying to organizations, we could indeed say that, 'Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication' (p. 4, quoted by Taylor, 2011, in this issue).

But beyond the importance of Dewey's pragmatic stance, what does it mean to adopt a 'communication as constitutive' view of organization? Certainly, communication appears regularly as a variable in conventional models of organization; in what ways does a CCO perspective proffer alternative conceptualizations while presenting novel insights on organizational processes? In other words, what kind of epistemological and ontological positioning needs to be adopted to consistently and coherently develop a CCO approach?

We believe that the articles in this special issue provide compelling responses to that question. But before presenting them, we would like to propose, by way of introduction, a series of six *premises* that could help us define what the CCO perspective entails in terms of research agenda, methodologies, and epistemologies. Following the presentation of these premises, we then present some of the key contributions of CCO theorizing, which we introduce through three primary contributions to a coherent theory of organizing and organization: McPhee's four flows model, the Montreal School's co-orientation model, and Niklas Luhmann's model of self-organization (autopoiesis). We then show how CCO theorizing has already engaged with organizational theory through four mainstream research themes and intellectual developments:

organizations and organizational strategies as constituted in practices, contemporary theories of the firm, organizational sensemaking, and organizational identity. We then conclude this introduction by presenting the four articles selected for this special issue, as well as James R. Taylor's afterword.

### Six CCO Premises

The listing of these premises should not be understood as an attempt, on our part, to control or dictate the debate or agenda, or to provide a checklist for assessing scholarship. On the contrary, we consider this section to be an invitation to test and expand upon these premises' analytical and ontological productivity. If organization indeed exists *in* communication, some fundamental ways of approaching organizational forms need to be reconceived, which is what this series of premises—stated as characteristics shared by most, but certainly not all, CCO scholarship—proposes to lay down.

Premise 1: *CCO scholarship studies communicational events*. If the CCO perspective is to be taken seriously, it means that one should not only pay attention to language and discourse, but also to the interactional events that constitute the building blocks of organizational reality (Jian, Schmisser & Fairhurst, 2008a&b). It does not mean, of course, that one should exclusively focus on people interacting with each other (in meetings, activities, or informal conversations), but that any turn of talk, discourse, artifact, metaphor, architectural element, body, text or narrative should at least be considered in its performative (Latour, 1991) or transactional (Taylor, this issue; Taylor & Van Every, 2000) dimension. An 'event,' then, is not an isolated episode of action, but rather a segment of an ongoing and situated stream of socio-discursive practice (Schatzki 2001, 2006). If organizations are indeed *communicatively* constituted, it means that one should examine what happens *in* and *through* communication to

constitute, (re-)produce, or alter organizational forms and practices, whether these are policies, strategies, operations, values, (formal or informal) relations, or structures.

Premise 2: *CCO scholarship should be as inclusive as possible about what we mean by (organizational) communication*. Although we tend to naturally acknowledge that messages, as components of communication processes, take on all kinds of form (kinesthetic, facial, textual, intonational, clothes, body shape, architectural, etc.), it remains that the vast majority of the work on organizational communication and discourse tends to focus almost exclusively on the *textual* aspects of communication, whether through the form of documents, conversations or formal talks (for some important exceptions, see Greatbatch & Clark, 2005; Iedema, 2001, 2003). If the idea of communicative constitution is to make any sense, it appears that we, as analysts, ought to recognize that, for instance, organizational values, knowledge, or ideologies can be conveyed, incarnated and constituted not only through what people say and write, but also through what they wear, how they look, and how they gesture or behave (Cornelissen, Clarke & Cienki, 2011; Greatbatch & Clark, 2005; Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008).

Furthermore, such values, knowledges, or ideologies should not be understood as only carried out by human agents, but also by nonhuman ones--i.e., documents, architectural elements, pieces of furniture, and technologies (Latour, 2005). In short, CCO scholars tend to be ecumenical in conceiving of communication, as long as the aim moves beyond investigating talk occurring within an organizational container (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996) to see communication as *'the ongoing, dynamic, interactive process of manipulating symbols toward the creation, maintenance, destruction, and/or transformation of meanings which are axial—not peripheral—to organizational existence and organizing phenomena'* (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 22. Emphasis in original).

Premise 3: *CCO scholarship acknowledges the co-constructed or co-oriented nature of (organizational) communication*. If focusing on the *performative* character of (organizational) communication appears crucial to explore its constitutive nature, one should not neglect that any performance is as much the product of the agent that/who is deemed performing it as the product of the people who attend and interpret / respond to such performance—analysts included (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). As Bateson (1955/1972) and Goffman (1959) remind us, *we live by inference*, which means that any performance will never be reducible to the way it was intended or meant by its producer. For instance, what policies, decisions or job descriptions mean and cause is certainly something that organizational authorities try to control, but a constitutive view ought to take into account how their meaning and action are negotiated, translated and/or debated (Mumby, 1987).

This third premise, then, suggests that the meanings that emerge (in ongoing fashion) from communication are unlikely to be isomorphic with the original intentions of the multiple participants engaged in it. Ambiguity, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity across agents (of all sorts) is to be expected in organizing (Eisenberg, 1984; Giroux, 2006; Kuhn & Corman, 2003; Weick, 1979), such that both tracing the discursive power of the socio-material surround and understanding the production of meaning as a provisional and temporally-situated accomplishment become key to communicative thinking. A further implication of this third premise is that language in general is not compositional; i.e., the comprehension and meaning of a sentence in context is not systematically related to the meaning of its constituents (Bateson, 1955/1972). As organizational studies of sensemaking have amply demonstrated, specific phrases in context may cue entire conceptual frames and make those framed interpretations salient and, in



doing so, simultaneously encode and diagnose a situation and direct inferences for action (e.g., Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1988, 1993, 1995).

Premise 4: *CCO scholarship holds that who or what is acting always is an open question.* In connection with the last two premises, adopting a CCO perspective entails that we not only focus on human agency (i.e, what people *do* and display in communicating), but also on other forms of agency (textual, architectural, artifactual, technological, etc.). In connection with ongoing reflections on the role of figures, tropes and metaphors in the constitution of organization (Cornelissen, 2005; Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008; Cornelissen et al., 2008), we should therefore be as inclusive as possible regarding *what* or *who* is taking part in the constitution of organizational processes. For instance, strategies, visions and organizational missions constitute as many figures that are often implicitly or explicitly invoked in discussions, debates and talks, marking their potential contribution to what is happening in these communicational events. Speaking or acting *in the name of* strategies, visions or missions thus amounts to positioning these figures as participating in the definition of organizational situations, which is another way to speak of their agency, as delineated in and through communication (Cooren, 2010). In this sense, developing communicative explanations for the construction of organizations provides a capacity to address the social influence of collectivities without reifying or anthropomorphizing them (McPhee & Iverson, 2009; Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Premise 5: *CCO scholarship never leaves the realm of communicational events.* Although this premise will certainly be the hardest one to ‘swallow’ for many (organizational) scholars, it might also be the most important, given that it goes against analysts’ tendency to oppose structure and action, global and local, macro and micro (Giddens, 1984; Latour, 1991).

Being serious about the communicative constitution of organization indeed means that we cannot leave the realm of communicational events without the risk of betraying the ‘design specifications’ of our own agenda. Even if this positioning might, at first sight, look like a form of epistemological prison, the good news is that the inclusiveness advocated in the previous premises allows us to transform this incarceration into liberation. If an organization is literally and figuratively made of, say, buildings, strategies, statuses, operations, bodies, conversations, or documents, such a plural mode of existence has to be reenacted for another next first time, as Garfinkel (1967, 2002) would say, through what these figures, beings and things are doing (Guthey & Jackson, 2005; Guthey, Clark and Jackson, 2009). As Ashcraft (2011) notes, accounting for communication (even, or perhaps especially, in communication studies) used to be a matter of merely showing how symbolic activity generates social realities. Contemporary communicative thinking, however, broadens its explanatory reach to consider how the ideational and material—as in those buildings, strategies, statuses, operations, bodies, conversations, art, photographs, and documents—are co-implicated and co-constituted in organizing.

Something as material and (apparently) inert as a building, for instance, participates in the constitution of an organization through what it does: sheltering operations, channeling activities, impressing visitors, communicating some specific values, norms and ideologies (Dale & Burrell, 2008; Swales, 1998). Similarly, issues of power, authority or precedence (Taylor, this issue) should not force us to look outside communication, but, on the contrary, invite analysts to identify all the figures participating in the co-construction and co-constitution of an (organizational) situation, whether we speak, for instance, in terms of statuses, identities, expertise, rights, responsibilities, or money. For instance, figures such as job descriptions or titles can be invoked to influence the outcome of a discussion, but the mobilization of such sources of

authority and power should not force us to abandon the realm of action and communication. It should be, as Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) put it, “grounded in action” (p. 6) in the sense that such negotiations are contingent on the situated series of interactional moves comprising social practices. Paraphrasing the two Jameses (Dewey and Taylor), it is *in* communication that such figures will make a difference (or not) through the way their action is negotiated, imposed or debated.

Premise 6: *CCO scholarship favors neither organizing nor organization*. Although the communication as constitutive hypothesis owes a great deal to Karl Weick (1979, 1995) and the interpretive movement in general (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Deetz, 2003; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983), it remains that the focus on the process of organizing, as advocated by Weick, runs the risk of downplaying the very question of the constitution of organizational forms. Doing so also runs the risk of privileging an individualist ontology (despite what Weick and Roberts (1993) have been writing about collective mind, see Taylor & Van Every, 2000, 2011). By taking seriously the question of the mode of existence and action of organizational forms, CCO scholarship refuses to choose between studying how people get organized and how organizations come to be reenacted and reproduced through these activities.

As should be clear from these six premises, no specific methodology is privileged: The idea of communicative constitution can be analyzed either quantitatively or qualitatively, by focusing on narratives, interactions, texts, behaviors or even artifacts and architectural elements. What matters is that these studies remain grounded in action or, more precisely, in communication (as the central social practice), whether they get inspiration from network analysis, semiotics, conversation analysis, rhetoric or speech act theory, among many other possible approaches. Epistemologically, these premises imply that CCO is not merely an

examination of organizing processes, a re-invention of the study of organizational culture, or a banal set of claims about organizational ‘reality’ sidestepping questions of ideological control. At the same time, CCO is far from a unified enterprise: approaches differ markedly in the degree to which constitutive claims are explicit, in their meta-theoretical underpinnings, and in their engagement with ‘mainstream’ organization studies literature. But delimiting what CCO scholarship *is*, beyond these broad foundational premises, is less important than conveying what CCO work *does*, and what its agenda might *produce* in the future. We take these questions up next.

### **Contributions of CCO Theorizing**

Across its varied manifestations, CCO scholarship seeks to alter the bases of explanation. In psychological, sociological, and economic forms of explanation, accounts generally revolve around cognitive structures, institutional arrangements, and rational calculations of costs and benefits (Cummins, 1983; Granovetter, 1992; Harré & Secord, 1972; Wilson, 1970). When applied to organizational constitution, these forms of explanation argue that organizations exist to coordinate buyer and seller contracts, to minimize transaction costs, to manage decision-making complexity across organizational coalitions, to configure production resources and routines, or to provide a lifestyle to those who depends upon it (Barney, 1996; Davis, 2009; March & Simon, 1958; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Williamson, 1988). Under these logics, communication is either an organizing resource to be aligned with other factors of production, or a more or less efficient carrier of putatively pre-formed elements like knowledge.

In the six premises offered above, communication takes on a rather different cast: Communicative explanations see the production, destruction, and transformation of meaning as connected to the indeterminacy, ambiguity, and power inherent in all language. Consequently,

knowledge, rules, processes, persons, markets, and even organizations themselves are the ongoing products of meaning-making practices that are always political in the sense that they could have been produced otherwise (Alvesson, 1993; Deetz, 2003; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Communicative explanations neither foreground information transmission, valorize interpersonal agreement, nor assume that the individual's consciousness exists outside of language; instead, they show how constructions like the list in the previous sentence are generated out of the circumstances of situated interaction (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren & Taylor, 1997; Deetz & Putnam, 2001). Claims such as these can be stimulating, but they beg the question of what they have produced in terms of developing a coherent theory of organizing. Here, we discuss three primary contributions.

### **Constitutive Processes**

The theorizing encapsulated in the six premises above argues strongly for the need to alter conceptions of communication processes. Consequences of the shift inspired by those premises would be a more thoroughgoing attention to the multiplicity of agencies in meaning construction and to the fundamental contingency of action. Three lines of scholarship build on these assertions in presenting models for communicative models of organizational systems.

First is McPhee and colleagues' structuration-influenced "four flows" model (McPhee, 2004; McPhee & Iverson, 2009; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; see also Browning, Greene, Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2009). The flows—membership negotiation, reflexive self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning—perform organizing and constitute organizations by linking members together, establishing boundaries, shaping operations, adapting interaction, and situating the organization in relation to a larger field. As the flows intersect and become resources for one another, they produce and reproduce social structures that come to have

an existence as an organization. McPhee and colleagues' work shows how particular categories of communication process are central forces—though, as they emphasize, certainly not the only factor—combining interactive episodes into a social system.

A second strain of CCO theorizing is associated with the 'Montreal School,' (see, e.g., Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Brummans, 2006; Cooren, 2000, 2004, 2010; Katambwe & Taylor, 2006; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 1999, 2000; Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996; Taylor & Van Every, 2000, 2011). The Montreal School foregrounds the process of *co-orientation*, which occurs as people 'tune in' to one another as they engage in coordinated activity; as they do so, actors draw upon (and are simultaneously drawn upon by) the aforementioned multiplicity of agents and figures that participate in organizing. There are two linked manifestations of communication in co-orientation: conversation and text. *Conversation* is, in essence, situated message exchange, but it can also be portrayed as coordinated activity distributed across communities of practice (Cooren & Taylor 1997; Taylor, 2009). *Text* is the 'substance' upon and through which conversations are formed; they 'speak' for the organization by shaping the conversations that appropriate them. These elements occur together in constitution: "Text is the product of conversational process, but it is also its raw material and principal preoccupation. Together, then, conversation and text form a self-organizing loop" (Taylor and Van Every, 2000: 210–211). As these text-conversation relations are 'tiled' on top of another and drawn upon in distributed sites in the conduct of coordinated activity, the texts, practices, and authority relationships characteristic of organization emerge. The communicative products condense a myriad of conversations into a single abstract representation of collective identity and intention, which is necessary in coordinating and controlling collective action (Cooren & Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Van Every, 2011).

Less well known than the two preceding views among North American organizational communication scholars is work inspired by Luhmann's (1995) general theory of social systems. One of Luhmann's key insights is that organizations are systems that produce themselves *as* systems in large part by distinguishing themselves from their environments. Communicative events—often reduced to ‘communication’ or ‘communications’<sup>1</sup> in Luhmann's writing—are the fundamental units of analysis. Key to system (re)production, communication operates through a ‘selection’ of content (what Luhmann refers to as information), of the form and reason for their existence (utterance), and of the interpretation the message receives (understanding). The production of meaning, however, is never attributable to individual actors; rather, the communication *system* produces communication, because the system's effort to distinguish itself from its environment provides the locus for the synthesis of the three selections (Seidl and Baecker, 2006). The particular form of selection relevant to organizations is the decision: an event that produces both division from the environment and self-reference to past and future communicative events. Yet decisions are paradoxical, because they are complexity-reducing mechanisms that create *greater* complexity for subsequent organizational decision-making. Increasing complexity occurs because decisions display contingency with respect to other possibilities for choice and, for this reason, decisions resist closure and any final decidability. Yet the organization requires decisional events to both distinguish the system from its surround and to provide it license for its ongoing existence (Luhmann, 1986; Shoeneborn, 2010). The ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> For organizational communication scholars who bristle at the use of ‘communications’ and its implied preference for transmission over linguistic constitution (Axley, 1984), it is important to note here Luhmann's conception of communication. Luhmann (1992) distanced his vision from traditional information theory by insisting that ‘communications’—for him, the plural form of the notion of the communicative event—referred not merely to messages but to interactive episodes. Though employing communication as a common term, his systems- and message-based logic tends to be at odds with the models of coordination and control that operate on an assumed intersubjectivity between human agents guiding other CCO views (Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009), as well as visions of communication emphasizing its status as a verb rather than a noun.

need to ‘de-paradoxify’ organizational activity links communicative events together in a complex communication network, making Luhmann’s thinking of great interest to scholars drawing inspiration from advanced network theorizing (Leydesdorff, 2001; Monge and Contractor, 2003). Additionally, despite the aforementioned lack of familiarity among organizational communication scholars, Luhmannian visions of organizing have influenced conceptions of terrorist organization (Shoeneborn, 2010), a conception of organizational form (Baecker, 2006), strategy and organizational identity (Seidl, 2005, 2007), and communicative barriers separating research and practice (Kieser, 2002; Kieser and Leiner, 2009); the interest seems likely to grow.

For these three perspectives, the central concern of organization is process. Although its textualized and institutionalized forms may persist beyond any given conversation, it is only in and from the ongoing flow of interaction that organization emerges. A problem in making these views amenable to the broader organization studies field is that, because of their sophisticated conceptions of communicative process, they ‘often become mired in complexity, immersed in abstract language, and unable to articulate similarities and differences among perspectives’ (Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009, p. 2). The shortcoming of a complex conception of process is that the ability to theorize the entity—the ‘thing’ that is taken to be organization—may be sacrificed. Though many CCO scholars caution against essentializing the notion of organization by limiting it to either formal manifestations or identifiable units (e.g., Stohl and Stohl’s 2011 article in this issue), entativity is a common conception of organization beyond the confines of organizational communication (as well as in many lines of work within it). Thus, pursuing communicative explanations that either reinterpret organizations’ entativity or that provide a clear and compelling process-based alternative should be a collective priority for CCO scholars.



## Engaging with Organization Theory

An ‘absent presence’ in a good deal of CCO writing is the skeptic, the scholar who is uninterested in novel visions of organizations and organizing unless they offer meaningful alternatives for existing research programs. The three schools of thought in the preceding section certainly establish rationales for disturbing the prevailing *doxa* by interrogating extant conceptions of communication and organization, but they generally fail to make contributions to programmatic theory in conventional terminology and logics. Making advancements in CCO’s impact on organization studies depends on doing so (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Here, we highlight and illustrate four mainstream research themes and intellectual developments -- organizations and organizational strategies as constituted in practices, past and contemporary theories of the firm, organizational sensemaking, and organizational identity -- already affected by CCO scholarship. Besides highlighting these intersections, the main point of these illustrations is also to demonstrate the potential value of mainstreaming CCO research more generally across organizational topics and communities.

**Strategy-as-Practice.** One stream of work drawing that has started to draw CCO thinking to make a substantive contribution to organization theory is the ‘strategy-as-practice’ perspective (see Fenton & Langley, 2011; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011, in this issue). This perspective focuses on strategy as patterns of activities and as the performances or practices that make up these patterns. Research in this area trades under different names including “strategy-as-practice,” “strategizing activities” and “micro-processes” (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Johnson et al 2003; Whittington, 2006) and implies a methodological commitment to studying the communication between, and decision making of, strategists in organizations *in situ*. Research on such strategy practices has also been sensitive to the temporal nature of strategy, exploring

sequences and episodes of strategy-making (Hendry & Seidl, 2003), the outcomes and products of such episodes, and the interrelationships between the two (e.g., Mantere, 2008; Régner, 2003). In addition to using an assortment of methodologies that are attuned to their questions around micro-level processes, strategy practice researchers also frequently adopt a multi-disciplinary approach — incorporating ideas and perspectives from behavioral decision-making, ethnomethodology, interpretive and macro sociology, cognitive psychology and linguistics, to name but a few of the disciplines from which research has been borrowed.

One obvious connection between CCO and strategy as practice involves a theorization of communication processes (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). As Fenton and Langley's article in this issue shows, the production and conduct of strategy in organizing is increasingly seen as a communicative accomplishment (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittington, 2006) or as 'practical coping' (Chia & Holt, 2006), and these conceptions have much in common with the visions of organizing offered in CCO models. Strategy, of course, is a major and longstanding concern for organizational scholars and practitioners, and Fenton and Langley's contribution suggests that an integrative perspective attending to narratives employed in the everyday work of managers, alongside macro-level strategy narratives, can provide not only a useful antidote to conventional (positivist) conceptions, but also provide an agenda (and methodological guidance) for a programmatic vision of strategizing.

**Theories of the Firm.** A second line of CCO-oriented scholarship with an interest in shaping organization theory is that concerned with developing a distinct theory of the firm. Theories of the firm, typically associated with economics, management, and social psychology, serve as both touchstones and guides for research and practice through their stances on four basic

issues: the reasons for a firm's existence, its logics of internal operations, the locations of its boundaries, and its sources of competitive advantage. Although CCO arguments are unquestionably germane to these issues, communicative theorizing has yet to construct a compelling alternative to well-known approaches emphasizing transactions costs and governance (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972; Williamson, 2002), institutionalized cognitive rules and practices (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983) and evolving competencies and capabilities (Conner & Prahalad, 1996; Zollo & Winter, 2002).

Although several lines of scholarship intersect in providing elements of communicative responses—particularly Deetz's (1995) and Smith's (2004) Habermasian-influenced visions of firms as conversational and decisional communities of stakeholders, along with Baecker's (2006) Luhmannian conception of distinction-making systems—Kuhn (2002, 2005, 2008; Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003) has perhaps most manifestly pursued these questions. His contribution to the development of a 'communicative theory of the firm' builds upon the Montreal School's conversation-text dialectic to portray firms as represented by abstract 'authoritative texts' that become game-pieces in actors' efforts to control the organization's trajectory (see also Fenton & Langley, 2011; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011, in this issue). Focusing on the multiplicity of texts available for appropriation in firm constitution and on the necessity of marshalling the consent of stakeholders, Kuhn (2008) articulated conceptions of strategy, inter-organizational relationships, and performance that speak to the interests of organization scholars operating from more well-established theories of the firm. Building on these points in the (collective and ongoing) construction of a such a theory holds promise not only as an alternative foundation for research emanating from those four basic issues, but also for the sharpening of CCO claims with respect to particular organizational forms and practices.

**Organizational Sensemaking.** Organizational communication scholars have long been claiming that communication is an important force of organizing, and indeed that it is the building block of organizations (e.g., Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Inspired by Weick's (1979) emphasis on the process of *sensemaking* and *organizing* (rather than the noun and entity of organization) as well as by the turn towards discourse and language analysis in the social sciences, this claim, as we have argued, lies at the basis of CCO. When sensemaking was first introduced within organization studies it presented a general theory of strategy and organization as a self-organizing system of environmental enactment. Porac et al.'s (1989) classic study of the "myopic enactment" of strategies in the Scottish knitwear community of Hawick is an example of enacted sensemaking. Through detailed analysis of sensemaking episodes in the community over time, they uncovered the self-reinforcing nature of the competitive beliefs that managers in that community held, and acted upon, in turn escalating their commitments to a particular strategic repertoire of competitive behaviors.

In this way, the construct of enactment bridged between prior cognitions and beliefs, behavioral actions, and consequences and as such it characterized an environment as constructed and enacted, rather than as separate from an individual agent. In a recent commentary on their classic study Porac et al. (2011) argue that few studies since have followed in the same vein in using sensemaking to explore the processual dynamics of how strategies, organizations or markets evolve over time. There are two obvious reasons for this; first, as Porac et al. (2011) suggest, much research has since focused on a set of "causal primitives" and a limited set of constructs at a specific level of analysis (Kaplan, 2011), and have largely disentangled cognition from communication and symbolic behaviors. A second reason is the development of sensemaking, as a theory, since Porac et al. (1989) initial study. Sensemaking has in recent years evolved from a bridging construct (around enactment) into a increasingly broad umbrella

construct (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) that has usurped divergent theoretical principles around, for example, cognitive dissonance, the autonomic nervous system, behavioral enactment, social identity, behavioral routines, emotions, speech acts and the escalation of commitment (see, e.g., Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Whilst the expansion to and subsequent incorporation of these principles into a single theory is laudable, it obviously brings with it challenges to its validity because of a lack of specificity and in suggesting a broad, over-simplified and insufficiently operational theory (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; see also Hirsch and Levin, 1999).

A recent development in sensemaking theory that heeds these validity challenges and foregrounds its processual nature is the increasing use of CCO scholarship (e.g., Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Weick et al. (2005), for example, explicitly draw on Taylor and Van Every (2000) to suggest that collective sensemaking, to the extent that it involves communication, takes place in interactive talk and draws on institutionalized resources of language in order to formulate and exchange through talk symbolically encoded representations of the jointly experienced circumstances (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). As this occurs, a situation is talked into existence as basis for collective action. Communication and the collective sensemaking that emerges from it, they suggest, is an act of turning circumstances “into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard to action” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 40; see also Weick et al., 2005). A CCO perspective of organizational sensemaking considers organizations not as a given, but as emerging in, and indeed constituted by or incarnated in local episodes of communication. What this means is that organizations are constantly (re)produced, (re)incarnated and (re)embodied in local interactions, and thus subject to change and renewal.

**Organizational Identity.** Another area where CCO scholarship has started to contribute is in the long-standing tradition of research on organizational identity. Within the larger domain of organization studies, research on organizational identity has been influenced by various disciplinary perspectives, notably social and cognitive psychology. Within social psychological research, for example, research has focused on how individuals categorize themselves and others into social or organizational groups, and how, in terms of that categorization, they seek to achieve or maintain positive self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group from a comparison out-group on some valued dimension. This quest for *positive distinctiveness* means that when an individual's sense of self is defined in terms of 'we' (i.e., social identity) rather than 'I' (personal identity), they strive to see 'us' as different from, and preferably better than, 'them' in order to feel good about who they are and what they do (e.g., Haslam 2004; Haslam, van Knippenberg, Platow & Ellemers, 2003; Hogg & Terry, 2000, 2001). As such, an organizational identity is defined as a collective self-definition or cognitive self-representation of organizational members ('who are we?') that is 'generally embedded in deeply ingrained and hidden assumptions' (Fiol & Huff, 1992, p.278) and refers to those features that are labeled and perceived 'as ostensibly central, enduring, and distinctive in character [and] that contribute to how they define the organization and their identification with it' (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p.372).

Whilst cognitive and social psychological traditions have made valuable contributions to organization studies, these tend to offer accounts of organizational identity as packaged outputs reflecting relatively stable and predictable meaning systems and categorizations (Cornelissen et al., 2007), and as such often lack detail and precision in their delineation of constituent elements and processes in context. The reification of what are essentially dynamic and socially situated signification processes around identity and identification as either a discrete text with a set of

identity labels or as a monadic cognitive schema or belief system (Gioia et al., 2000) assumes stable vehicles of meaning, and such analyses therefore struggle to account for how language and thought interpenetrate in context as communication unfolds. CCO scholarship provides a valuable complementary perspective, and connects with recent interests in organizational identity from a discourse perspective (Leclercq, 2011, in this issue). It aligns with the discursive perspective in considering organizations as “socially constructed from networks of conversations or dialogues; the inter-textuality, continuities and consistencies of which serve to maintain and objectify reality for participants” (Humphreys & Brown, 2002: 422).

As we have argued, CCO suggests that communication, and the use of language (i.e. speech, discourse and rhetoric) within it, constitutes organizations, and, in this view, it only becomes possible to conceive and talk of an “organizational identity” as grounded in language and as having “no existence other than in discourse, where [its] reality is created, and sustained, to believe otherwise is to fall victim to reification” (Taylor & Cooren, 1997: 429). But CCO goes beyond the discursive perspective in delineating how researchers can “scale up” from communication between individuals (micro) to macro organizational phenomena such as organizational identity, and detect such macro phenomena in local interactions (Cooren, 2004). Macro institutions and identities, in a sense, speak through our utterances to the effect that our talk always is collective or organizational (Taylor & Cooren, 1997). Larger structures such as rules and procedures are embodied, implicated or even ventriloquized in specific acts of communication and sensemaking in the “here” and “now”, with such embodiments and incarnations shaping future action and communication (Cooren, 2010). Taylor and Cooren (1997) and Taylor and Van Every (2000) thus show how communication, whilst allowing individuals to magnify the power of their personal voices, implies epistemic closure in their understanding of

the circumstances or objects to which they relate, with this closure changing their relationship into a single unit (an “in-group” or “organization”). Their affiliation switches to the joint relationship (see also Cornelissen et al., 2007), and as a result they may act as a single corporate or organizational agent (Taylor & Cooren, 1997).

## **Order and Disorder**

A general assumption underlying scholarship on strategy-as-practice, organizational sensemaking, organizational identity and theory of the firm scholarship—along with most of the CCO work in the preceding section—is that communication *organizes*; it creates order out of potential disorder (Cooren, 2000). Longstanding beliefs about the functions of communication are that it is essential in solving important social problems, particularly those related to a perceived lack of community, a threat to cultural continuity, or a need for a smoothly-functioning social system (Pinchevski, 2005). The concern for order has a long sociological heritage, but some assert that *disorganization* and *disordering* should play a more central role in our conceptions of scholarship. For instance, Law (1994: 249) argues that organizational scholarship should either pursue ordering moves by generating better explanations of the ‘problem of organization,’ or disordering moves, which ‘create more narratives that generate questions’ in the interest of destabilizing existing theories (see also Cooper, 1990; Hassard, Kelemen, & Cox, 2008). If, as indicated above, communication is as much about the destruction and transformation of meanings as it is about their construction, CCO thinking should consider such questions relevant to its mission.

Beyond the value in interrogating intellectual dominance, however, what might a communicative vision of disorganization provide, and what sort of social problems might it highlight? Two possibilities stand out. One route would attend specifically to the presence of



irrationality, paradox, and contradiction. Such themes are increasingly seen not as indicators of ineffective organizing, but as unavoidable and necessary characteristics of complex organizational practice, such that both organization and communication are seen as conflicted sites of human activity (Brunsson, 2000; Putnam, 1986; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Although none of the CCO models mentioned above assume a simplistic unity or unproblematic rationality, CCO models have had relatively little to say about irrationality, paradox, and contradiction. Yet they would appear well-suited to explaining the construction and maintenance of organizational contexts that foster these organizational features through their attention to intersecting (and perhaps conflicting) flows of discourse and the presence of struggles over authorship of collective texts. Investigations of this sort would not seek to eliminate tensions, but would endeavor to shed light on politics, power, and the possibility of novelty in organizing.

A second path to capitalizing on disorganization could be to connect CCO thinking more closely with ethics in organizing. Although some suggest that the voluntary character of interpersonal interaction gives all communication a moral basis (e.g., Penman, 1992), contemporary theorists such as Levinas and Bauman reconfigure communication as an ever-present responsibility for the Other (Pinchevski, 2006). Most communication—and especially that associated with formal organizations—concentrates on signification, representation, and the achievement of personal or collective identity. Levinas (1979), in particular, argued that interrupting the ‘efficient’ flow of interaction by introducing challenges to certainty and routine may thwart efficiency and threaten individual security, but that it is only through communicative ‘failure’ and the generation of uncertainty that we recognize the fundamental interdependence of selves and Others (Deetz, 2008).

Organization studies scholars have begun to pick up this theme in explorations of organizational ethics, focusing attention on ethics as *practice*, in an effort to understand the complexity and ambiguity of organizing, along with the dilemmas actors—with their fragmented and multiple moral selves—face (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007: 113; Leclercq, 2011, in this issue). Others see organizational and professional ethical codes as constraining moral agency while allowing actors to see the system as responsible for handling moral issues (Bauman, 1989, 2001; Jensen, 2010; Shearer, 2002; Soares, 2008); drawing on the theorists mentioned above, these authors tend to argue for the need to perturb practices to enable authentic engagements with Others (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007; Kuhn, 2009; ten Bos, 1997). Despite CCO scholars' aforementioned interest in ordering over disordering, foregrounding interruptions and communicative disturbances has the potential to provide a vision of organizing that places ethics centre-stage while simultaneously broadening conceptions of dialogue (Cooren, 2008, 2010; Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2005).

### **Presentation of the Articles and Afterword**

As mentioned previously, the four articles and afterword published in this special issue all demonstrate how the CCO perspective can contribute to a better understanding of the functioning of organizations. The first article, authored by Christopher Fenton and Ann Langley, builds from current theorizing on narrativity, a major focus of CCO theorizing (Cooren, 2000, 2001; Robichaud et al, 2004; Taylor & Van Every, 2000), to address key aspects of the practice of strategy. Taking up Whittington's (2006) tripartite framework for studying different elements of strategy (praxis, practices and practitioners), they propose a fourth element – the strategy text – to highlight the key role authoritative texts can also play in the constitution of strategizing process (Kuhn, 2008). A narrative perspective thus allows them to define research agendas that encourage scholars to focus on these four elements: 1) *praxis*: how storytelling contributes to the

constitution of shared understanding about strategy, 2) *practice*: which narrative plots and genres characterize strategy discourse, 3) *practitioners*: what are the different subject positions and identities of strategy practitioners, 4) *strategy texts*: what are the narrative aspects of strategy texts, as well as their production and consumption.

To these four research agenda items they propose three additional ones, focused on the notions of narrative infrastructure (Deuten & Rip, 2000), metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004; Taylor & Robichaud, 2007) and coherence. The fifth research agenda encourages scholars to question and unveil the macro-narrative that appears to emerge from the cumulating of organizational stories, a narrative infrastructure that is supposed to ultimately channel and organize the activities of the organization members. As for the sixth research agenda, it enjoins scholars to conceive of the practice of strategy as a form of meta-conversation where fragmented, polyphonic and plural identities are narrativized to form organizational, univocal or monophonic identities. Finally, the seventh research agenda reminds us that organizational coherence and unity always have to be achieved and reaffirmed out of incoherence and diversity, which means that scholars need to study the diversity of individual narratives, a diversity that ultimately contribute to the constitution of collective ones.

The second article, authored by Cynthia Stohl and Michael Stohl, proposes to renew the idea of communicative constitution by exploring the special status of clandestine organizations, especially terrorist ones, such as al Qaeda. Starting from the basic tenets of the Montreal school (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), the two authors come to question what they consider to be its implicit assumption of *organizational transparency*, a transparency that is, of course, absent in the case of clandestine organizations. Interestingly, challenging this assumption allows them to put forward specific types of communication that constitute covert organizing and are both a matter of secrecy and public relations.

While a non-secret organization's official representatives can attempt to communicatively co-constitute what their organization is and does through relatively open debates and discussions with various stakeholders, clandestine organizations are marked by the absence of "quasi-contractual understandings that establish the fundamental relationships that form the basis of an organization" (Stohl & Stohl, this issue, p. XX). This means, according to these authors, that analysts and observers have to rely on contextual (i.e., historical, institutional and political) cues to establish what constitutes and does not constitute such organizations, a task that is rendered difficult by the many protagonists who might claim to represent a given organization. Stohl and Stohl then conclude their article by showing that such reflections can have important practical implications regarding how one fights against terrorism, depending on how clandestine organizations are thought to be constituted.

The third article, authored by Paul Spee and Paula Jarzabkowski, proposes to analyze the detail of the communicative processes that constitute the development of a strategic plan in a university. Echoing the first article of this special issue (Fenton & Langley, 2011), they focus on the iterative construction of an authoritative text (Kuhn, 2008), which is shown to be developed through recursive activities of re-contextualization and de-contextualization, two notions they borrow from Paul Ricoeur, one of the philosophers who highly influenced Taylor's (1993) foundational work on the constitutive property of communication. As these authors show, the production of any written document creates effects of distancing, allowing the text to become relatively autonomous and de-contextualized from its condition of production. Any subsequent talk relying on this text thus implies a work of re-contextualization, which consists of actualizing its meaning in the current conversation.

By focusing on the recursive interplay between talk and text, Spee and Jarzabkowski show how the strategic plan not only disciplines and defines what can be tackled during

managerial conversations, but also provide authority and legitimacy to the participants who manage to successfully mobilize it in their discussions. This dance of agency (Pickering, 1995), both human and textual, progressively leads to the fixation of all the elements of a strategic plan. Furthermore, a progressive minimization of competing interpretations also contributes to distancing this authoritative text from the discussion where it is produced and altered, marking its increasingly authoritative nature.

The fourth article, authored by Aurélie Leclercq, offers an innovative interpretation the ‘communication as constitutive’ approach to organizations by drawing on Michel Foucault’s (1977, 1979) work. As she demonstrates, a Foucauldian perspective on the CCO argument can help us conceive of discourse and communication as loci of domination and resistance, through which matters of knowledge, power and ethics are relationally constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Through the case study of a large building company that implemented new mobile technologies used by foremen on construction sites, the author conducted interviews and field observations that led her to show how authoritative and less authoritative discourses contributed to the constitution and interpretation of this IT project.

As demonstrated by her analyses, the official discourses held by top management contributed to representing this IT project as mainly incarnated in the material and approved usages of the new communication technologies, a dominant discourse that also gave way to some forms of resistance from middle managers and staff members. This implementation, which was officially presented as empowering foremen by promoting their autonomy and self-discipline, indeed led to new forms of surveillance and control of their activities, creating discrepancies between dominant and unofficial discourses, as well as resistance on the part of some foremen who decided to disrupt these new forms of subjection. This case study thus demonstrates how

organizations are constituted by dynamic power-knowledge relationships mobilizing discourses, technologies and subjectivities.

Finally, James R. Taylor's afterword offers a nice conclusion to this issue by first presenting a brief history of the organizational communication field, a history that, as Taylor shows, led scholars to progressively take communication seriously as the starting point of their organizational studies. Taking communication seriously, according to him, consists of studying not only the interactional, but also and especially the *transactional* aspects of communication, which mark the *mutual forms of obligation* that characterize our conversations and (individual and collective) identities. Commenting and elaborating on the four previous articles of this issue, he thus shows how this transactive logic informs (i.e., gives a form to) clandestine and overt organizations as much as it allows interactants to create precedence and authority, leading to the empowering of specific texts and technologies.

As Taylor demonstrates by reviewing extant research on strategy, institutions, boundary objects, discourse and materiality, enacting transactive relationships constitutes the very way by which individuals end up constructing themselves as a "single conjoint source of action" (p. XX), that is, a "we," or what he also calls an "organization in the small" (p. XX). It is through recursive effects of transaction and imbrication that these "we's" will ultimately constitute an organization in-the-large. If an organization is built one transaction at a time, these transactions involve not only the social units that we call individuals, i.e., I's, but also the we's that these transactions contribute to produce and constitute. It is through this imbricated configuring of transactions that communication constitutes organizations.

### FINAL COMMENT

It is clearly the case that as a manifesto for future research, the above premises and modes of

CCO theorising are both promising and challenging for organization studies. Certainly, there is every reason to believe that organizational researchers will continue to study organizations and organizational phenomena through alternative sociological, economic, discursive or psychological lenses and with little concern for an engagement with CCO, let alone of the form encouraged here. In itself, this is of course not a bad thing, and in a sense it highlights the lively variety and debate within the field of organization studies at large. Our sense, however, is that the time is now ripe for a constructive dialogue across communication and organizational literatures in order to promote a more integrated understanding of the role that communication plays in creating the meaning, the form, and indeed the very possibility of organizational life. The prospects of such a dialogue are enhanced by recognition of the fact that in recent years important bodies of organizational scholarship such as strategy as practice, sensemaking and organizational identity have turned to, or indeed have been productively influenced by, CCO theorizing. The input and mainstreaming of CCO into such scholarship, we believe, underscores, more generally, the promise and potential of CCO as a platform for organizational analyses.

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